

QUAKE FLATTENS ANCIENT IRAN CITY; AT LEAST 5,000 KILLED, MUD-BRICK MEDIEVAL FORTRESS CRUMBLES

From the Chicago Sun Times on December 27, 2003

KERMAN, Iran – Entire blocks of buildings lay crushed and survivors lined up blanket-wrapped bodies in the street after a devastating earthquake leveled nearly three-quarters of the Iranian city of Bam on Friday, killing at least 5,000 people and injuring 30,000 others.

The quake also destroyed much of Bam's historic landmark – a giant medieval fortress complex of towers, domes and walls, all made of mud-brick, overlooking a walled Old City, parts of which date back 2,000 years.

Television images showed the highest part of the fort – including its distinctive square tower – crumbled like a sand castle down the side of the hill, though some walls still stood.

Local officials said the death toll could reach up to 12,000, though the deputy governor of Kerman province said an accurate count was impossible with many victims still trapped under the rubble. "Rescue operations are going slowly because of darkness," deputy governor Mohammad Farshad said.

"The disaster is far too huge for us to meet all of our needs," President Mohammad Khatami said. "However, all the institutions have been mobilized."

The government asked for international assistance, particularly search and rescue teams. The United States promised to send aid, as did numerous European nations.

By nightfall Friday, little outside relief was soon in Bam, a city of 80,000 people in southeastern Iran. With temperatures dropping to 21 degrees, survivors built bonfires in the rubble-strewn streets to keep warm, many shivering in their nightclothes, the only clothes they had since the pre-dawn quake.

At Bam's only cemetery, about 1,000 people wailed and beat their chests and heads over some 500 corpses that lay on the ground as a bulldozer dug a trench for a mass grave.

"This is the Apocalypse. There is nothing but devastation and debris," Mohammed Karimi, in his 30s, said at the cemetery, where he had brought the bodies of his wife and 4-year-old daughter.

"Last night before she went to sleep she made me a drawing and kissed me four times," he said of his daughter, Nazenine, whose body he held in his arms. "When I asked, 'Why four kisses?' she said, 'Maybe I won't see you again, Papa,'" Karimi said.

The quake struck at 5:28 a.m. (7:58 p.m. Thursday, Chicago time) while many were asleep. The U.S. Geological Survey measured it at 6.5 magnitude. Survivors were panicked throughout the day by aftershocks, including one that registered a magnitude of 5.3, according to the geophysics institute of Tehran University.

The interior minister said 70 percent of residential Bam had been destroyed, and there were no electricity, water or telephone lines.